INHABITING ENCLOSURES AND CREATING SPACES: EXISTENTIAL STATE OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND ALICE WALKER

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"Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers…like men she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal!" - Ernestine Louise Rose (qtd, in Sree 1)

Although women's contribution to the growth and development of human civilization has always been great, it has never been fully recognized historically. The most enduring enemies of a woman's dignity and security are cultural forces aimed at preserving male dominance and female subjugation—often defended in the name of tradition. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies. Simon de Beauvoir rightly pointed out that, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature-which is described as feminine" (267).

In a male dominated society, submissiveness, sacrifice and tolerance are the attributes that a woman is expected to possess. In the words of Mary Ann Fergusson, "…in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, and as sex object-their roles in relationship to men!" (4-5) Women are oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the matter of sharing opportunities for fulfillment of their lives. They are even subjected to assault, rape, verbal abuse, mutilation, etc. This is the predicament of women all over the world.

All the conflicts that stand as constraints and hinder the growth of a woman, and which have negative and destructive consequences on a woman's personality, will be termed as 'enclosures' in this proposed study. These enclosures manifest the existential agony and accentuate the existential dilemma of a woman. A woman passes through various stages of existential temperaments in order to finally realize that it is only by her own efforts that she can overcome her existential agony.

The philosophy of Existentialism found its significance during World War II when Europe was in a state of utter chaos and destruction. It is essentially associated with the condition of man, his act of living, his state of being free and the directions he takes to use his freedom. Existentialism asserts that man's freedom is hampered by the limitations imposed on him and so the negative aspects of his existence like anxiety, pain, death, etc, are seen as the features of man's reality. It focuses on the individual entity's quest of meaning in life amidst nothingness. Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, are mainly credited for their works and writings about Existentialism.

As Existentialism is a very broad term which deals with different concepts of many philosophers, this proposed study would primarily be based on the Existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who has given the movement its definitive expression. Sartre was an active participant in the French Resistance Movement in World War II. He served in the French army and also remained a captive in Germany for a certain period of time. At this time of crisis, he started questioning the meaning and reality of his existence. This study would deal with some of the important features of Sartrean Existentialism like existence precedes essence, existential humanism, man as a subject rather than an object, freedom of choice, authenticity, quest for identity and meaning, guilt, alienation, death, anxiety, despair, etc.

In his philosophical essays, novels, short stories and plays, Sartre investigates the psychological problems of life and diagnoses that Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. His version of Existentialism is set out in popular form in his essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). In this essay he claims his famous dictum,

‘Existence precedes essence’, which shatters the traditional belief that man has predefined essence. Hence he believes that people must decide for themselves the meaning of existence. Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* asserts:

> What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (3)

Another important tenet of Sartrean Existentialism is ‘humanism’. In arguing that Existentialism is a humanistic philosophy, Sartre means that it places the human being at the centre of its attention. He also proposed the idea of human being as ‘subject rather than object’ i.e. humans are not objects to be used by God or a government or society and they are not born just to be adjusted into roles like a writer or a mother or a worker, therefore, they should look deeper than these roles and find their inner selves.

Sartre believed that each person is endowed with unlimited freedom. In his philosophy, the freedom of choice is a significant characteristic of human existence. Existential freedom denies following the external factors like, heredity, society, family, or fate. The freedom is seen as a general power of choice and is followed by responsibility. Therefore, another important aspect of the Sartrean existential philosophy is its concern with the sense of responsibility. According to Sartre, Man bears a responsibility before other citizens, for his actions. By acting, he creates a certain essence for society; any action which one takes, affects the rest of humanity. One must not move away from one's responsibility nor must one place the responsibility for one's actions onto the shoulders of

someone else. Everyone bears responsibility to make his/her life meaningful as he/she cannot blame their environment, circumstance, or chance for their successes and failures.

Sartre wrote, "The choice of authenticity appears to be a moral decision" (qtd. in Flynn 63). In *Being and Nothingness*, he made a fundamental distinction between 'being-in-itself' (non-experiencing material objects which are not free) and 'being-for-itself' (experiencing being which is free). As a second category human beings are free to construct their lives by their own way of existence but this 'freedom of choice' is not acknowledged by every human being and therefore, again two categories are emerged out of it which are defined as 'bad faith' and 'good faith'. According to Sartre in the category of 'good faith', human being is authentic to his own self and accepts his role as a creator of his own way of life. Instead of accepting the social roles as it is given, the human beings are conscious in their choice. Therefore, Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism motivates humanity to live their lives under 'good faith' and accept one's freedom, and responsibility and apply it in their actions. It also focuses on moral individualism i.e. the belief that an individual is supposed to create his/her own values because there is no moral order in the universe by which he/she could guide their actions.

According to Sartre, man in despair considers himself to be a victim of external conditions, but when he comes to understand that the trouble is within, he intensifies his predicaments. The realization of one's own indefinite situation in the world creates anguish. Sartre considers anguish to be the outcome of man's uncertainty. Sartre also gives importance to the concept of anxiety. He expresses his idea of anxiety when he writes, "In anxiety I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 40).

Anxiety is linked with threat to the basic, fundamental values of an individual and it often involves uncertainty and feeling of insecurity

Alienation emerges as natural consequences of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms and it is a universal feature of the human condition. Alienation is the feeling that one is a stranger in one's own life, a stranger in the world. Sartre believed that individuals live in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other people, and from their own selves.

Sartrean Existentialism proposes death not as a physical event or biological process but the awareness that one is going to die. According to Sartre, death is the ultimate context for all human actions and an important source of the absurdity of life. According to his philosophy, the idea of death is dimmed down when we treat it simply as a natural fact rather than an event that evokes fear and anxiety.

Therefore, Sartre's existential understanding of what it is to be human can be summarized in his view that the human beings, through their consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning for their life because they do not possess any inherent values or identity. It is up to each agent to exercise his freedom in such a way that he does not lose sight of his existence as a free human being. In so doing, he will come to understand more about the original choice which his whole life represents, and about the values that are thereby projected. Such an understanding is only obtained through living this particular life and avoiding the pitfalls of strategies of self-deceit such as 'bad faith'.

This study is primarily based on the selected novels of Pulitzer Prize winning, Afro-American writer, Alice Walker and winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award, the well established Indian English writer, Shashi Deshpande. Both India and

Africa have undergone the similar experience of Colonialism, and Neo-colonialism which have resulted in common social, political and economic problems, therefore, it becomes imperative to discuss the backgrounds against which these two writers evolved.

In the Indian society, a girl is infused with the ideas of self- abnegation, of the need to accept the lower status through the mythical stories of Sita, Savithri and Gandhari. Following these models, she is taught to be shy and gentle as a person, faithful as a wife and selfless and thoughtful as a mother. At every stage of her life, the Indian woman is dependent for her survival upon her father, her husband, and her sons. It is believed that the position of women in India was degraded with the foreign invasions, like that of the Mughals. The purdah system ordained by them prevented women from participating in public affairs. They were victims of social evils like *sati*, female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy and dowry. Shanta Krishnaswamy, aptly remarks about the true status of Indian woman who "…as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bride price when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family or who, as a widow in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati Savithri', as an immortal" (qtd. in Sree 9).

Exposure to reformist movements, economic independence and influence of western feminist movements during the Nineteenth century, played a significant role in bringing a change in the attitude and status of women in India. Impelled by the urge to seek a new and just way of life, women began to voice their feelings and experiences. However, one cannot overlook the fact that a considerable percentage of the average Indian women remained unchanged, shackled by the superstitions and customs that are perpetuated in the name of tradition. They are still victimized under the domination of their

male counterparts; they are sexually exploited and are exposed to the evils of dowry and infanticide. At present, the Indian woman is standing in a phase of transition, where neither can she completely break away from her traditional roots, nor can she overlook the need to find new liberated identity. Amidst this dilemma, she finds herself confused and alienated.

The Afro-American woman, like the Indian woman has been subjugated but their subjugation has been different from that of the Indian women in a certain way. They are considered to be the dual victims of racism and sexism. This 'double jeopardy' has created a complex painful and dehumanizing reality in which they have struggled for freedom and selfhood. Black women have always been suppressed. During slavery they were workers first, women second and always black and these three identities locked them into positions of vulnerability. They faced violence at the hands of their white masters not only in the form of hard labour and whipping lashes but also became victims of sexual abuse. These women were often raped by their white masters, their children were sold away and they were beaten by their male counterparts. Thus, they were robbed of their respect, dignity and identity. Harihar Kulkarni writes in this context:

> The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche. Their physical bondage ultimately turned into a psychological bondage causing mutation and mutilations of their world. The external forces operating at the socioeconomic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The poisonous fangs of slavery manifested themselves in innumerable ways

> and finally determined the behavioral pattern of black women. (Kulkarni 59)

The condition of women in both the cultures, Indian as well as Afro-American is found to be the same in terms of their anguish and their subsequent empowerment. Indian women - treated as subalterns since ages – are shown to speak out in protest and ultimately overcome their stereotyped position and suffering which is inflicted more in psychological terms. On the contrary, the Afro-American women go through as much physical and psychological pain for they are the victims of both patriarchal and racial discrimination. They suffer from double marginalization and they continue their journey from despair to hope. Both the Indian as well as the Afro-American women fight against injustice like brave warriors and ultimately emerge victorious, thereby, becoming the queens of their own destiny.

Born in 1938, Shashi Deshpande, is one of the well known female writers of Indian English Fiction. She began writing at the age of thirty and has four volumes of short stories, four children's books, seven novels, and a collection of critical articles to her credit. The fact that her father, Adya Rangacharya, was an eminent literary writer of Sanskrit and Kannada languages helped her become a writer herself as she was introduced to the habit of reading and free thinking at a very young age. She states that there were three things in her early life that have shaped her as a writer- the fact "that her father was a writer, that she was educated exclusively in English and that she was born a female" (*Of Concerns, Of Anxieties* 107). Deshpande, a writer of depth and insight, in almost all her novels narrates the story of educated middle class women who are victims of exploitation, discrimination, oppression, negligence, and even rape. In almost all her novels, the

protagonists move from innocence to experience. She suggests through each of her novels, certain ways which can help women achieve emancipation within the prevailing socio-cultural scenario.

This study is predominantly based on Deshpande's four novels, namely, *The Dark Holds No Terror, That Long Silence, The Binding Vine and Moving On.*

Deshpande's first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), portrays the secondary position of the woman in her parental house as well as her husband's home where the male ego overpowers all other considerations in the relationship of marriage. Saru, the protagonist suffers due to gender bias in her childhood and sexual assault in her adulthood. It is only when she goes back to her parental house that she decides to confront her husband and revolt against all the injustice she had been facing from her childhood. In the words of S.P. Swain, "Saru's journey is a journey from self alienation to self identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She leans to trust her feminine self." (Swain 39)

That Long Silence (1988) is about silences which surround a woman's life. . It vividly portrays the sense of hollowness that haunts a middle class housewife who is trapped in a kind of self-created, self imposed silence. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel realizes her real power as a woman only after being put to silent sufferings for a pretty long period of seventeen years. The novel is noteworthy for the positive note on which it ends as Jaya decides to find her identity in the meaningless world by following the saying: *Yathecchasi Tathe Karu* ("Do as you desire").

The Binding Vine (1993) is the story of an educated Indian woman, Urmila who comes forward to assert the rights of other women. Urmila is the most remarkable of

Deshpande's characters as she unlike Sarita, Indu and Jaya, doesn't seem to be satisfied with changing her own life but also takes a step for the cause of other women. It is through this novel that Deshpande has tried to hint that the true emancipation of women can be achieved only through the bond of sisterhood and solidarity among women. In order to revolt against the enclosures of male dominance, exploitation and suppression, women need to join hands and fight against all the injustice by helping each other.

Moving On (2004) is in many ways, a departure from Deshpande's earlier novels. Here she ventures even deeper into the territory of the mind, dismantling our notions about the relationships within families. The novel symbolizes the inner struggle of the protagonist, Manjari, an educated young widow, who lives in close association with society brushing aside all its narrow conventions. Manjari, as the survivor, is the new woman, who redefines freedom and also relationships; an affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother and a good friend. Manjari challenges the essentialist notion of female identity as male fabrication and leaves the door open for social and cultural change.

Alice Walker, the prolific protest writer who worked as a social worker, lecturer, and took part in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi was born in 1944 to Minnie Lou Grant and Willie Lee Walker, share croppers, and grew up in a small town of Eatonton, Georgia. She herself confesses that it was her mother's artistry that made a huge impact on her mind. Since her childhood she had not just witnessed but had also experienced discrimination in the form of racism and sexism. She felt the existence of gender bias at a very young age when she was accidently blinded in one eye by her brother and her parents did not give her timely medical aid. It was because of the scar that she started living in isolation and turned to reading and writing poetry.

Walker continued to explore writing in all of its forms. In 1973, she published a set of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*; the poetry collection, *Revolutionary Petunias*; and her first children's book, *Langston Hughes: American Poet*. However, Walker's career as a writer took flight with the publication of her third novel, *The Color Purple*, in 1982. In almost all her novels, Walker depicts the life of oppressed black women who try to overcome the hardships through love and bonding, and strength of will. Barbara Christian opines, "Walker's work contributes to, and perhaps represents the epitome of, a rapidly – developing theme in Afro-American women's writing: that of female self-development and self-definition" (19).

This study is predominantly based on Walker's four novels, namely, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar.*

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) acquaints the reader with the story of three generations of the Copeland family. The novel is set up in the late 19th century America when there was share cropping system and the blacks were subjugated by the whites. Alice Walker successfully highlights the miserable condition of the blacks especially the women. The women in the novel, Margaret, Mem and Josie face several enclosures like racism, sexism, marriage, rape and motherhood yet they try to cope with these and show their inner strength. In this novel, Walker tries to highlight the black women's strength and determination as well as their struggle to gain freedom from the evils surrounding their lives.

In her second novel, *Meridian* (1976), Walker exhibits her own conflict and disappointment with the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. Walker also deals with the problems that the protagonist, Meridian experiences in her journey from adolescent

unawareness to mature self-knowledge and presents the conflict in the life of women who break away from stereotype roles of obedient daughter, dutiful wife, adoring mother and lover. Her discords are not only with the external enclosures but primarily with herself, her self destructive nature, her inner guilt.

The Color Purple (1982) is primarily a novel that highlights the conflicts in the life of the protagonist, Celie. It is a passage of her subjugation in a patriarchal society, her sexual exploitation by her father, and her husband and her personal transformation from acceptance of her exploitation, to gradual realization of her own feelings to complete accomplishment of her freedom. *The Color Purple,* through its black lesbian theme and sisterhood of black women, helps restore the woman to herself, her body, mind and soul. Quilting, songs and clothing are rich metaphors used by the novelist to reveal the transcendence of the existential agony of women.

In The Temple of My Familiar (1989), Walker goes a step forward to redefine sexual domination issues, puts down completely the roots of male superiority by creating a past with women in dominant roles which was later to be reversed. The novel deals with conflicts in a unique manner that provides new insights which have universal appeal. Through Lissie's character, Walker highlights that discords amongst races and sexes can be dispensed with not by revenge, anger and hatred, but by an affirmation of positive attributes and appreciation of each other.

Both the novelists, Shashi Deshpande and Alice Walker belong to different nationalities. They have expressed the experiences regarding enclosures in their own socio-political, and cultural context. They deal with the realities of exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination. Through their female characters, they graphically delineate

the traumatic impact of the enclosures on the lives of the women that lead to the birth of their existential agony. The writers delve into the resolutions adopted by their women protagonists to create their own spaces, while inhabiting enclosures, and progress towards emancipation and freedom of self.

The literature review reveals that most of the researches are focused primarily on the feminist aspects of the novels of Shashi Deshpande. For instance, Kruti Tripathi in her research paper, *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: In the Light of Indian Feminist Ethos*, talks about the feminist perspective in her major two novels, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Dr Neeta Sharma in her study, *Authentic Female Characters in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* , emphasizes on the realistic projection of Indian women characters in Deshpande's novels. Gopinath S. in his research paper, *Feminist Consciousness in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande*, also evaluates the novels of Shashi Deshpande from a feminist perspective.

Similarly, Alice Walker has attracted the attention of many researchers and critics and a considerable body of research has been done on her novels but from other literary aspects. For example, Rajendra Thorat has analyzed Walker's pioneer work, *The Color Purple,* from a feminist outlook in his research article, *Concept of Feminism in Alice Walker's The Color Purple: An Analysis*. In his thesis, entitled, *Alice Walker's Womanist Fiction: Tensions and Reconciliations*, Iman Hami examines how Alice Walker's own theory of 'womanism' is reflected through the oeuvre of her fictional works. E. Kumar in his research paper, *Oppression and Exploitation, Feminization in Alice Walker's Works*, traces the subjugation and exploitation of women in the novels of Walker.

The proposed study marks a point of departure from the above mentioned seminal research contributions in the study of Shashi Deshpande and Alice Walker as it would analyze their works from an existentialist perspective. The selected novels of both these writers render immense scope for the application of Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism. It would, further, compare the selected works and highlight the commonalities and dissimilarities in Deshpande's and Walker's literary and stylistic approaches. This study will be an attempt to contribute significantly and expand the dimensions of literary research.

The Objectives of the proposed study will be:

1. To make an in depth study of the Existential philosophy of Sartre and its impact on literature.
2. To explore the dynamics of enclosure.
3. To make a study of the existential predicament of women in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande and Alice Walker.
4. To explore the emergence of the new woman in the selected novels.
5. To make a comparative study of the interior and exterior landscape in the novels.
6. To critically examine the stylistic techniques used by the two novelists.

The tentative chapter division of the proposed study would be as follows:

1. Introduction: (A) Existentialism (B) Sartre's Philosophy of Existentialism
2. (A) Dynamics of Enclosure (B) Life and Milieu of the Novelists
3. The Existential State and Making of the New Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

4. Interior and Exterior Landscape: The Existential Agony and the Emancipation of Women in the Novels of Alice Walker
5. An Analysis of the Stylistic Techniques
6. Conclusion

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